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ABSTRACT

A study investigated: (1) whether the distribution of eighth graders' scores on measures of the strength of imaginary audience and personal fable across levels of cognitive development would support Elkind's cognitive theory; and (2) whether such students' level of interpersonal understanding would support Lapsley's contention that interpersonal understanding is the aspect of development most clearly associated with the egocentrism of adolescence. Subjects were 52 eighth grade students between 13 and 14 years of age who attended a junior high school in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Three paper and pencil instruments and a personal interview were administered. The written instruments were the Imaginary Audience Scale (Elkind and Bower, 1979), two subscales from the Personal Fable Scale (Green et al., in press), and seven items from Form A of the How Is Your Logic Test (Grey and Hudson, 1984). Results supported neither Elkind's theory of the developmental basis of imaginary audience and personal fable nor Lapsley's theory of an interpersonal basis for these variables. In no case did cognitive developmental stage or interpersonal understanding contribute significantly to the strength of imaginary audience or personal fable. It was concluded that the major questions about the genesis of adolescent egocentrism remain unanswered. (RH)

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A Test of Two Theories: Elkind and Lapsley on the Imaginary Audience and Personal Fable

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A Test of Two Theories: Elkind and Lapsley on the Imaginary Audience and Personal Fable

Adolescent egocentrism is the name commonly given to a type of self-centering often noted in individuals in the transition from childhood to adulthood. David Elkind (1967, 1978) conceived of adolescent egocentrism as having two aspects, constructs which he called the imaginary audience and the personal fable.

Elkind's cognitive developmental explanation of the rise and fall of these egocentric adolescent behaviors has stood for 20 years. Elkind's position is that adolescent egocentrism is a function of cognitive development, in a line with the egocentrism of the sensorimotor, the preoperational, and the concrete operational stages of cognition. As formal operations become established, the adolescent's newfound powers of abstract thinking and the extreme transitional focus on a changing body produce the distorted perceptions exemplified in the imaginary audience and the personal fable.

Recently Lapsley and Murphy (1985) challenged Elkind's theory, holding that interpersonal understanding is the aspect of development most clearly associated with the egocentrism of adolescence. These writers conceded the necessity of formal operations to the flowering of imaginary audience and personal fable, but maintained that cognitive development is not sufficient. Interpersonal understanding, they argued, itself based on cognition, must be present at a relatively high level for the egocentric behaviors to be strong.

Until recently, empirical investigation of Elkind's constructs and the theoretical formulations regarding them has been hampered by weak instrumentation, especially relating to the personal fable. Now, Green, Morton, Cornell and Jones (in press) have developed a personal fable scale which appears to enlarge the possibilities for research in this area. Furthermore, this scale comes at a time when several of Elkind's central contentions have been questioned (e.g., Goossens, Marcoen and Verplaetse, in press).

The research questions investigated in the present study were twofold: (1) would the distribution of scores on measures of the strength of imaginary audience and personal fable over levels of cognitive development support Elkind's theory and (2) would level of interpersonal understanding be related to the criterion variables after cognitive-developmental effects have been accounted for, and therefore support Lapsley's contention.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 52 eighth graders at a junior high school in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Eighth grade pupils, 13-14 years old, were chosen because they are of sufficient age to have reached the formal operational stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1972) and level 2 or 3 of interpersonal understanding (Selman, 1980).

Instruments

Three paper and pencil instruments and a personal interview were administered. The written instruments were the Imaginary Audience Scale (Elkind and Bower, 1979), two subscales from the Personal Fable Scale (Green et al., in press), and seven items from How is Your Logic? (Grey and Hudson, 1984), a scale used to identify level of cognitive development. Individual interviews measuring degree of interpersonal understanding were based on the technique of the Social Reasoning Project of the Harvard-Judge Baker Guidance Center (Selman, 1979).

The Imaginary Audience Scale (IAS) yields two subscales. The Transient Self subscale (TS) includes questions about what a subject would be likely to do in circumstances that might prove embarrassing. These items relate to one's appearance or performance and how one might feel about it. Items in the Abiding Self subscale (AS) ask a subject to respond to hypothetical situations in which one might reveal relatively permanent aspects of the personality.

The Personal Fable Scale (PF) also yields two subscales. An Invulnerability subscale (IS) refers to such behaviors as believing that one can take risks without getting hurt. The Unique Self subscale (US) measures the extent to which one feels different from others. Test-retest reliability reported by the scale's developers is .57 for IS and .75 for US over a 4-week period. Since these estimates were based on college students, however, an examination of test-retest reliability and internal consistency with younger adolescents was part of the purpose of the study.

Level of cognition was measured by a subset of items from Form A of How is your Logic, HIYL (Grey, 1979). This pencil and paper instrument is based on Piaget's definitions of operational thinking. It is scored according to criteria which give part credit for partially complete or correct answers and that focus on the reasons for certain responses. This method is held by the author to be more congruent with Piagetian theory than is the dichotomous scoring used for many standardized tests of cognitive development (Grey, 1978).

Interpersonal understanding (IU) was measured through a partially structured interview (Selman, 1979). The complete

interview covers four domains of IU. Performances across these domains are strongly correlated (Selman, 1980) and the issues in the persons domain are those which Lapsley emphasized as being related to imaginary audience and personal fable (Lapsley and Murphy, 1985). Subjects in this study therefore were interviewed only in the persons domain.

Procedures

All subjects completed the written instruments at one sitting. Presentation of the scales was counterbalanced so that there were no order effects. Following collection of the written data, the subjects were interviewed individually. Approximately 4 weeks after the initial testing, all subjects were retested on the personal fable instrument and then debriefed.

Results

Subjects in this study scored similarly to results reported in other studies on all variables except interpersonal understanding. Selman (1980) reported mean scores of approximately 2.4 across all four IU domains for a sample of 13-14 year olds, and 2.5 on the persons domain. Subjects in this study had mean scores on the persons domain of 2.17. In addition, discrepancies existed between IU scores reported in this study and level of cognitive development. Selman (1980) found that no subject who gave any indication of being at level 3 on interpersonal understanding was classified below formal operations. In the present study, at least eight of the subjects at IU levels 2(3) and 3(2) were concrete thinkers.

Results of data analysis did not support Elkind's theory of the developmental basis of imaginary audience or personal fable and furnished no support for Lapsley's theory of an interpersonal basis for these variables. The variance accounted for by all predictors in regression analysis ranged from 6% to 17%. In no case did cognitive developmental stage or interpersonal understanding contribute significantly to the strength of imaginary audience or personal fable.

Reliability values from the personal fable scores in the present study were encouraging. Alphas ranged from .63 to .85 for the two subscales separately and total PF over two administrations. Test-retest values for the IS and US were greater than those reported by the instrument's developers.

Discussion

The possible developmental bases of imaginary-audience and personal-fable behaviors remain unidentified. Although it has been described frequently over the last 20 years, Elkind's cognitive theory has yet to accumulate the confirming evidence that it accurately explains this portion of the adolescent experience. Lapsley's social-cognitive approach, published in 1985, has been untested until now. The findings reported here

provide no support for either explanation, and the major questions about the genesis of adolescent egocentrism are left unanswered.

Nonetheless, the information from this study adds to the body of data concerning the constructs of interest. In some instances previous findings were affirmed; in others earlier evidence was contradicted. Perhaps most importantly, the outcomes of reliability analysis made as part of this project help to establish the usefulness of a new instrument.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of

Mean Scores on All Variables

Variable	Females (n=33) Mean	S.D.	Males (n=19) Mean	S.D.	Total Group Mean	S.D.
IS	1.903	0.583	2.084	0.641	1.969	0.605
US	2.792	0.714	2.438	0.622	2.663	0.697
PF	2.389	0.471	2.282	0.506	2.350	0.482
AS	1.060	0.390	0.828	0.332	0.976	0.383
TS	0.886	0.494	0.867	0.384	0.879	0.453
IAS	1.011	0.368	0.873	0.241	0.960	0.332
HIYL	3.864	0.930	4.570	1.589	4.122	1.245
CDS	1.333	0.479	1.895	1.100	1.538	0.803
IUS	2.153	0.146	2.194	0.171	2.168	0.155
Age	13.635	0.544	3.643	0.467	13.638	0.512

Note. IS = Invulnerable Self, US = Unique Self, PF = Personal Fable total, AS = Abiding Self, TS = Transient Self, IAS = Imaginary Audience Scale, HIYL = How Is Your Logic?, CDS = Cognitive Developmental Stage, IUS = Interpersonal Understanding Score.